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SUBJECT: HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE FOR IRAQI REFUGEES IN SYRIA FACING START-UP CHALLENGES

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11. (SBU) Summary: The following is a trip report by PRM Jay Zimmerman. The international community's response to the needs of Iraqi refugees has expanded the numbers and scale of humanitarian agencies in Syria, however, humanitarian space remains confused and uncoordinated. Local UNHCR representatives said they can now more constructively engage the Syrian government and have been successful in expanding services - particularly health and education services - for Iraqis. NGOs criticize the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) for failing to register them quickly and efficiently and excluding them from funding opportunities and coordination mechanisms, although even the Syrian MFA acknowledges the delays originate elsewhere. Despite a lack of data on existing refugee numbers and needs, all PRM-funded NGO projects are reaching their contracted targets. However, they are limited by their design to either serving small numbers of refugees with comprehensive programs or relatively larger numbers of refugees with one-off distributions. All NGOs said they will request no-cost extensions and/or budget modifications due to delays in initiating project activities. End Summary.

12. (SBU) Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) TDY Refugee Coordinator (Ref Coord) Jay Zimmerman and Project Management Specialist Mona Halasa visited Syria from February 2-8 to assess the progress of PRM-funded NGO projects in implementing humanitarian assistance activities for Iraqi refugees, identify constraints humanitarian agencies are encountering in programming activities assisting Iraqi refugees, and highlight collaborative actions Embassy Damascus and PRM can implement to improve humanitarian assistance to Iraqi refugees. Ref Coord visited the Damascus offices and, in most cases, the partners of NGO projects funded by PRM (International Medical Corps (IMC), International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC), Catholic Relief Services (CRS), and International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC)), met with UN agencies (UNHCR, WFP and UNICEF) and had meetings with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) and PRM's Overseas Processing Entity the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Ref Coord agreed to provide Embassy Damascus with copies of completed IPEs (Interim Progress Evaluations) on all NGO projects evaluated and to draft a paper outlining suggested activities PRM and Embassy Damascus can collaborate on to improve protection and assistance activities for Iraqi refugees in Syria. This cable highlights general constraints and opportunities humanitarian agencies encounter in Syria.

¶3. (C) UN humanitarian agencies confirmed that the international community's quick and generous response to their 2007 appeals assisting Iraqi refugees was instrumental in convincing the Syrian Government (SARG) to expand humanitarian space for the UN to provide services to Iraqis and directly contributed to the SARG permitting international NGOs to begin operating in Syria. The SARC, for example, said 43 international NGOs have registered to sign MOUs to implement Iraqi-focused assistance programs in Syria. (NOTE: SARC informed Post that 14 international NGOs have signed the MOU, though Post has only been able to verify that IMC and the French NGO Premiere Urgence have signed. END NOTE.) UNHCR Resident Representative, Laurens Jolles said PRM's funding has given UNHCR the ability to constructively engage the SARG to expand and link protection and assistance programs for Iraqis. For example, Jolles said the families of Iraqi refugee children enrolled in Syrian public and private schools and those Iraqis with medical conditions - both central planks of UNHCR's and the international communities, humanitarian efforts - automatically have their visas renewed permitting them to stay in Syria and receive assistance. UNHCR Jolles also said the international response, along with Syria regularizing the transit of Iraqis through a visa regime introduced in October 2007, gave the Syrian government more control over the Iraqi population allowing it to open public services to Iraqis.

¶4. (C) Besides contributing to a geographic expansion of services, international funding has also served to broaden the number of program sectors the UN and SARC are active in

and has helped humanitarian agencies strengthen their management capabilities. The SARC, for example, had only a health and disaster response capacity in 2006, but by the time of our visit had also expanded their activities to include NGO registration and coordination, food and non-food item (NFI) distribution, and was seeking technical assistance for psychosocial programming. To expand and improve its programming and management capacity, the SARC is receiving technical assistance from two International Federation partners (the French and Dutch Red Cross) and has accepted an expat secondment (funded by ECHO) to assist it in managing the MOU process for international NGOs. (NOTE: The SARC expressed a desire to develop stronger ties with the American Red Cross - including a possible secondment of an American Red Cross technical assistant. END NOTE.) SARC Director General Marwan Abdallah said interactions with international NGOs have improved the SARC's abilities to implement programs for poor Syrians as well as for Iraqis. IMC, for example, had helped the SARC develop a common drug list, implement standard operating procedures and initiate a HIS (Health Information System) that it is adapting for its clinics - none of which had been in place prior to IMC's intervention. International community funding for Iraqi refugees is also expected to introduce new or improved models of practice to existing Syrian social services such as psychosocial and mental health programs, vocational and informal education, trafficking and gender-based violence programs.

But, Rapid Expansion Came at a Price

¶5. (SBU) The sudden increase in funding for Iraqi refugee programs, however, has distorted the normal functioning of UN agencies and other organizations. UNHCR-Syria's budget in 2006, for example, was \$700,000, increased to more than \$43 million in 2007 and, if fully funded in 2008, will increase again to \$137 million. Maintaining internal controls, effectively coordinating with other UN agencies and even finding physical space to accommodate the increase in staffing Iraqi-specific programs were all mentioned as

straining the internal capacities of UN agencies and UN Country Team functioning. UNICEF warned that, although not yet evident, the continued expansion of programs for Iraqi refugees and the lack of complementary funding for poor Syrians with similar needs could lead to increased social tensions targeted at Iraqis - particularly as food, fuel and housing prices are expected to increase shortly.

16. (C) The sudden increase in funding and rush to begin assistance programs have also limited the UN's ability to establish basic information on the target population or establish coordination and referral mechanisms with other agencies. Rudimentary information such as the total number of Iraqis requiring assistance, their location and the extent of their vulnerability continue to be a matter of controversy since significant donor contributions began to flow into UNHCR in 2007 (Ref A). UNICEF Representative Anis Salem lamented that the UN Country Team still lacks a coordinated UN emergency response framework to meet the needs of this emergency. The lack of a framework was cited by Salem as a factor behind the issuing of uncoordinated UN appeals last year, contributed to the rapid expansion of one UN agency (UNHCR) at the expense of other UN agencies, and the UN Country Team's lack of unity over UN priorities and strategies.

17. (C) The sudden demand of international NGOs seeking registration to implement assistance programs in Syria also led to a complicated, confusing and frustrating process for NGO registration. The SARG's appointment of the SARC as the gatekeeper for international NGOs to operate in Syria has strained the organizational and programmatic capacity of the SARC and, claims the SARC's Abdullah, detracts SARC staff from implementing its own substantial programs for Iraqi refugees. The reluctance of UNHCR to sign sub-agreements with any of the international NGOs in Syria until they have first signed an MOU with the SARC has left the SARC in a privileged position to obtain existing sub-agreements from UNHCR and has created tensions within the NGO community. The privileged position and the delay in signing MOUs with NGOs has bred NGO suspicion and speculation as to the SARC's intentions. IMC Director Ibrahim, for example, speculated that the SARC (along with Federation partners) were monopolizing activities and funding opportunities in the health sector by operating only in the most desirable clinics and limiting NGO's participation in health coordination meetings with UNHCR. IMC and other NGOs also speculated

about the extent to which the SARC would "control" NGO programs and budgets - including salaries of expat and local staff, administration and overhead costs, etc. via the MOU process. (NOTE: Dr Attar, SARC President, confirmed that international NGOs, after having signed the MOU with SARC, would also be required to have their individual program plans and budgets approved by the SARC before they could begin implementing activities. The SARC has not yet developed, let alone informed, NGOs of acceptable guidelines for program plans or budgets. Dr. Attar, for example, said the SARC will not approve programs or budgets that have excessive overhead or administrative costs, but was unable to define what excessive administrative costs would be. END NOTE.)

A Response That Is Uncoordinated and Spotty

18. (C) There is a growing concern in the international community that the Syrian government and UNHCR's estimates and assessments of the needs of Iraqis in Syria are not substantiated (Ref A) and have led to inappropriate assistance - such as a heavy emphasis on school construction. All of the NGOs encountered, including the SARC's Abdullah, agreed that the total number of Iraqis was less than the official estimate of 1.2-1.4 million Iraqis, but few would venture how many fewer. IOCC questioned the official out-of-school rate cited in the UN Regional Education Appeal by saying it had to call over 12,000 Iraqi families it has registered for NFI distributions in order to identify 340

out-of-school youth for its programs. Most NGOs said Iraqis who wanted to attend existing schools could enroll, but often dropped out for reasons related to overcrowding, lack of money for school costs, unfamiliarity with the curriculum or other reasons. UNICEF's Salem said his analysis of school data also called into question the claim of severe overcrowding in Syrian schools caused by the enrollment of Iraqis saying he was not aware of any one school with more than 50 Iraqis enrolled in it. UNHCR countered that, regardless of the number of Iraqis in Syria, the number of vulnerable Iraqis and Iraqis needing assistance was increasing as Iraqis are unable to legally work, their savings were becoming depleted and the costs of rent, food and fuel were constantly increasing. UNHCR said it will expand both its geographic reach within the country as well as increase the number of Iraqis it will provide assistance to from 130,000 in 2007 to more than 350,000 in 2008 to meet the increasing needs for assistance. (NOTE: Even at the official estimates of 1.2 -1.4 million Iraqis in Syria, assisting 350,000 is equivalent to assisting almost one quarter of the total number of Iraqis in Syria. END NOTE.)

¶9. (SBU) All PRM-funded NGOs, however, reflected UNHCR's argument that the NFI, health and education needs among Iraqis remains largely unmet and is growing. UN and NGOs alike stressed the growing need for financial assistance to pay rents and the need for food. All PRM-funded NGOs (including IMC who will begin implementing programs six months late) were confident they will meet or exceed their beneficiary population targets by the end of the approved project period. (NOTE: All NGOs said they will be requesting no-cost extensions for their projects due to delays in project implementation. END NOTE.) CRS, for example, which only began Damascus humanitarian assistance operations one week prior to our visit, reported seeing 30 cases the first week, and had already scheduled 400 Iraqis for assistance interviews while Iraqis seeking assistance at ICMC have been told they have a three month wait for an interview. The networks established through churches, mosques and interfaith contacts, are being effectively used by the NGOs working through local churches or religious organizations such as Caritas to identify, refer and assist needy Iraqis regardless of religious affiliation. None of PRM's funded projects exclusively target any one faith. All NGOs said they expect to expand their geographic reach in 2008 to reach Iraqis in under or not-yet served Syrian communities and towns. PRM-funded projects, however, were found to provide either in-depth comprehensive services to a relatively limited number of families or individuals or they reach an impressive number of families but with limited services. ICMC, for example, provides a comprehensive set of case management services including home visits but is only targeted to reach 3,600 families. IOCC, on the other hand, has, to date, provided one-off hygiene and school supply packages to more than 10,000 families, but each family is limited to only one distribution per year.

¶10. (SBU) Referral mechanisms and coordination between agencies are nascent and adhoc. ICMC and CRS are both using the same database and can share referrals with the eventual goal of minimizing duplication of services, but no coordinated database similar to the BIS in Jordan exists in Syria (Ref B) for all providers to use. (COMMENT: Ref Coord suspects overlap in services and service areas among PRM-funded projects which better coordination could reduce. END COMMENT.) ICMC has taken the lead in initiating coordination between PRM-funded NGOs (Ref C), but this has only happened one time (NOTE: Subsequent to the visit of Ref Coords, Embassy Damascus reported the second NGO coordination meeting. END NOTE.) One of the initial tasks of the coordination group is to map the service areas of participating NGOs to minimize overlap. As mentioned earlier, no PRM-funded agency has been invited to participate in UNHCR/SARC coordination meetings because they had not yet signed MOUs with SARC. NGOs said the lack of coordination between themselves and with UN agencies is leading to

divergent policies guiding project implementation. For example, SARC cited ECHO's policies of only permitting Iraqis to receive health services in three clinics it is supporting whereas SARC policy is to permit both Syrians and Iraqis to receive services. CRS reported another conflicting policy impacting their program in that UNHCR provides 30 percent of in-patient hospital costs whereas CRS and ICMC both pay 100 percent of hospital costs leading to "shopping" for services among the Iraqi population and an oversubscription of inpatient health services in their projects.

¶11. (SBU) Agencies providing assistance to Iraqis are currently limited to UN agencies, SARC and those NGOs affiliated with religious organizations (ICMC, IOCC and CRS). UN agencies (principally UNHCR) have chosen to not sign sub agreements with NGOs who are not yet registered with SARC. (NOTE: CRS and ICMC have both informed SARC they are interested in signing the MOU - partly to permit them to access UNCHR funding. END NOTE) UNHCR said it wants to rely less on the Syrian government in 2008 and more on direct implementation (i.e. through partnerships with SARC and NGOs), however IMC told Ref Coord it may not be able to sign sub agreements with UNHCR because of UNHCR's limitations on providing overhead and admin costs. WFP also said it is open to using partners other than SARC to distribute food, but, again, is limited because of the lack of NGOs who have signed the MOU. UNHCR also expects to engage as many as 200 Iraqi volunteers to expand its outreach efforts and most NGOs have highlighted the untapped potential of existing structures such as community centers that can be used to reach into the Iraqi communities.

¶12. (SBU) NGOs report that Iraqis are frustrated trying to obtain services from UNHCR. NGOs claim Iraqis are reluctant to spend dwindling resources on the transportation costs associated with various trips to and from UNHCR (to register, be interviewed and then to return for assistance). NGOs also criticize UNHCR assistance as not being mean-tested, but rather, based only on having registered with UNHCR. The lack of consistent vulnerability criteria among NGOs and UN agencies encourages "shopping" for the best deal and undermines efforts to reach the most vulnerable.

Gaps and Other Issues

¶13. (SBU) All PRM-funded NGOs said they will request no-cost extensions for their projects due to delays in initiating project activities. All NGOs said they will also be requesting budget modifications or realignments as initial estimates of costs were unknown or severely underestimated (rents in particular) at the time of proposal submission, or because they have been able to realize savings in one activity and want to shift savings to another oversubscribed cost center (usually from education costs to health costs). CRS will request an additional \$250,000 to fully implement their education project claiming an error was initially made in their budget submission and copied into the Cooperative Agreement they subsequently signed.

¶14. (SBU) Despite the difficulty in working in Syria, all PRM-funded agencies are planning on submitting continuation proposals to PRM. NGOs underscored that last year's proposals were based on guess-work, but now, having been on the ground for some months, they have a better feel for where the gaps in services are. NGOs highlighted current gaps in services as: providing for secondary and tertiary care for Iraqis; rental and food assistance; expanding vocational training to young adults (18-24 years of age) and female-headed households; and, in providing remedial

education to help Iraqis in the formal school system to remain enrolled. New program needs were identified as mental health and psychosocial needs, expanding hygiene infrastructure (toilets and access to clean water) in schools, protection against trafficking and gender based violence and outreach to connect Iraqis to available services

including registration with UNHCR.
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